

As he put it: "My friends and I have been coddled long enough by a billionaire-friendly Congress. It's time for our government to get serious about shared sacrifice." [2011]

Understanding the Reading

1. In the context of this article, how does Warren Buffett disagree with Congress about how to solve our nation's debt crisis?
2. Why does the middle class pay a higher percentage of their income than the mega-wealthy in the United States?
3. With which statement do you agree: "Spreading the wealth punishes success", (i.e. the very wealthy should not pay more taxes); or "It is time for shared sacrifice", (i.e. the very wealthy have an obligation to pay higher taxes)?

Suggestions for Responding

1. Choose four European nations, (perhaps Germany, France, Denmark, and Spain) and compare what they get for their taxes, as opposed to what U.S. citizens get for their taxes.
2. Have a classroom discussion about where tax money should be spent to ensure a flourishing economy. ♦

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Imagine a Country

HOLLY SKLAR

Imagine a country where one out of four children is born into poverty, and wealth is being redistributed upward. Since the 1970s, the richest 1 percent of households has nearly doubled its share of the nation's wealth. The top 1 percent has more wealth than the bottom 90 percent of households combined.

It's not Jamaica.

Imagine a country whose national intelligence agency says, "Since 1975, practically all the gains in household income have gone to the top 20% of households."

Imagine a country where more and more jobs are keeping people in poverty instead of out of poverty.

Imagine a country where health care aides can't afford health insurance. Where food industry workers may depend on food banks to help feed their children. Where childcare teachers don't make enough to save for their own children's education.

Imagine a country where economic inequality is going back to the future circa the 1920s. In 1979, the bottom third of taxpayers had more than twice as much combined income as the top tenth of the richest 1 percent. In 2003, it was the other way around: The top tenth of the richest 1 percent of taxpayers had more income than the bottom third of taxpayers combined.

Imagine a country giving tax breaks to millionaires while cutting college tuition aid for students from low-income families. Imagine a country giving tax breaks to millionaires while cutting public health and safety, education, housing, economic development, environmental protection and other needed services.

It's not the Philippines.

Imagine a country with poverty rates higher than they were in the 1970s. Imagine a country that sets the official poverty line well below the actual cost of minimally adequate housing, health care, food and other necessities. On average, households need more than double the official poverty threshold to meet basic needs.

Imagine a country where the economy is increasingly not working for working people.

Imagine a country where productivity went up, but workers' wages went down. In the words of the national labor department, "As the productivity of workers increases, one would expect worker compensation [wages and benefits] to experience similar gains." That's not what happened. Between 1968 and 2005, worker productivity rose 111 percent, but the average hourly wage fell 5 percent, adjusting for inflation, and the minimum wage fell 43 percent.

Imagine a country where it takes nearly two minimum wage workers to make what one worker made four decades ago.

Imagine a country where the minimum wage has become a poverty wage instead of an anti-poverty wage. The minimum wage has lagged so far behind necessities that keeping a roof overhead is a constant struggle and family health coverage costs more than the entire annual income of a full-time worker at minimum wage.

Imagine a country where homelessness is rising for workers and their families, while federal

housing assistance for low-income families is slashed. The largest federal housing support program is the mortgage interest deduction, which disproportionately benefits higher-income families.

It's not Mexico.

Imagine a country where some of the worst CEOs make millions more in a year than the best CEOs of earlier generations made in their lifetimes. In 1980, CEOs of major corporations made an average 45 times the pay of average full-time workers. In 1991, when CEOs made 140 times as much as workers, a prominent pay expert said the CEO "is paid so much more than ordinary workers that he hasn't got the slightest clue as to how the rest of the country lives." In 2003, a leading business magazine put a pig in a pinstriped suit on the cover and headlined its CEO pay roundup, "Have they no shame? Their performance stank last year, yet most CEOs got paid more than ever." In 2005, CEOs made even more—352 times the pay of average workers.

A leading business magazine observed, "People who worked hard to make their companies competitive are angry at the way the profits are distributed. They think it is unfair, and they are right."

It's not England.

Imagine a country where wages are falling despite greatly increased education. Since 1973, the share of workers without a high school degree has plummeted and the percentage with at least four years of college has more than doubled. But the 2005 average hourly wage was 11 percent below 1973, adjusted for inflation.

Imagine a country where households headed by persons under age 35 had lower median net worth (assets minus debt) in 2004 than in 1995, adjusted for inflation.

Imagine a country where more and more two-paycheck households are struggling to afford a home, college, health care and retirement. Middle-class households are a medical crisis, outsourced job or busted pension away from bankruptcy.

Imagine a country becoming a nation of Scrooge-Marts and outsourcers—with an increasingly low-wage workforce instead of a growing middle class.

Imagine a country whose corporate and government policy makers are running the economy into the ground. The nation is in record-breaking debt to other countries. It has a record trade deficit, hollowed-out manufacturing base,

and deteriorating research and development. The infrastructure built by earlier generations of taxpayers has eroded greatly, undermining the economy as well as health and safety.

Imagine a country where more workers are going back to the future of sweatshops and day labor. Corporations are replacing full-time jobs with disposable "contingent workers." They include temporary employees, on-call workers, contract workers and "leased" employees—some of them fired and then "rented" back at a large discount by the same company—and involuntary part-time workers, who want permanent full-time work.

It's not South Korea.

How do workers increasingly forced to migrate from job to job, at low and variable wage rates, without health insurance or paid vacation, much less a pension, care for themselves and their families, pay for college, save for retirement, plan a future, build strong communities?

Imagine a country where polls show a large percentage of workers would join a union if they could, but employers routinely violate workers' rights to organize. A leading business magazine observes, "While labor unions were largely responsible for creating the broad middle class after World War II . . . that's not the case today. Most . . . employers fiercely resist unionization, which, along with other factors, has helped slash union membership to just 13% of the workforce, vs. a midcentury peak of more than 35%." Full-time workers who were union members had median 2005 weekly earnings of \$801 compared with just \$622 for workers not represented by unions.

Imagine a country where the concerns of working people are dismissed as "special interests" and the profit-interests of globetrotting corporations substitute for the "national interest."

Imagine a country negotiating "free trade" agreements that help corporations trade freely on cheap labor at home and abroad.

One ad financed by the country's agency for international development showed a Salvadoran woman in front of a sewing machine. It told corporations, "You can hire her for 33 cents an hour. Rosa is more than just colorful. She and her co-workers are known for their industriousness, reliability and quick learning. They make El Salvador one of the best buys." The country that financed the ad intervened militarily to make sure El Salvador would stay a "best buy" for corporations.

It's not Canada.

Imagine a country where nearly two-thirds of women with children under age 6 and more than three-fourths of women with children ages 6–17 are in the labor force, but affordable childcare and after-school programs are scarce. Apparently, kids are expected to have three parents: Two parents with jobs to pay the bills, and another parent to be home in mid-afternoon when school lets out—as well as all summer.

Imagine a country where women working full time earn 76 cents for every dollar men earn. Women don't pay 76 cents on a man's dollar for their education, rent, food or childcare. The gender wage gap has closed just 12 cents since 1955, when women earned 64 cents for every dollar earned by men. There's still another 24 cents to go.

The average woman high school graduate who works full time from ages 25 to 65 will earn about \$450,000 less than the average male high school graduate. The gap widens to \$900,000 for full-time workers with bachelor's degrees. "Men with professional degrees may expect to earn almost \$2 million more than their female counterparts over their work-life," says a government report.

Imagine a country where childcare workers, mostly women, typically make about as much as parking lot attendants and much less than animal trainers. Out of 801 occupations surveyed by the labor department, only 18 have lower median wages than childcare workers.

Imagine a country where more than 98 percent of the CEOs at the largest 500 companies are men, as are 95 percent of the top-earning corporate officers. Never mind that companies with a higher share of women in their senior management teams financially outperform companies with lower representation.

Imagine a country where discrimination against women is pervasive from the bottom to the top of the pay scale, and it's not because women are on the "mommy track." In the words of a leading business magazine, "At the same level of management, the typical woman's pay is lower than her male colleague's—even when she has the exact same qualifications, works just as many years, relocates just as often, provides the main financial support for her family, takes no time off for personal reasons, and wins the same number of promotions to comparable jobs."

Imagine a country where instead of rooting out discrimination, many policy makers are busily

blaming women for their disproportionate poverty. If women earned as much as similarly qualified men, poverty in single-mother households would be cut in half.

It's not Japan.

Imagine a country where violence against women is so epidemic it is their leading cause of injury. Nearly a third of all murdered women are killed by husbands, boyfriends and ex-partners. Researchers say, "Men commonly kill their female partners in response to the woman's attempt to leave an abusive relationship."

The country has no equal rights amendment.

It's not Pakistan.

Imagine a country whose school system is rigged in favor of the already privileged, with lower caste children tracked by race and income into the most deficient and demoralizing schools and classrooms. Public school budgets are heavily determined by private property taxes, allowing higher income districts to spend more than poorer ones. In the state with the largest gap, state and local spending per pupil in districts with the lowest child poverty rates was \$2,280 greater in 2003 than districts with the highest child poverty rates. The difference amounts to about \$912,000 for a typical elementary school of 400 students—money that could be used for needed teachers, books, computers and other resources.

In rich districts, kids take well-stocked libraries, laboratories and state-of-the-art computers for granted. In poor districts, they are rationing out-of-date textbooks and toilet paper. Rich schools often look like country clubs—with manicured sports fields and swimming pools. In poor districts, schools often look more like jails—with concrete grounds and grated windows. College prep courses, art, music, physical education, field trips and foreign languages are often considered necessities for the affluent, luxuries for the poor.

It's not India.

Imagine a country where the infant death rate for children in the nation's capital is higher than for children in Kerala, India.

Imagine a country whose constitution once counted black slaves as worth three-fifths of whites. Today, black per capita income is about three-fifths of whites.

Imagine a country where racial disparities take their toll from birth to death. The black infant mortality rate is more than double that of whites. Black life expectancy is nearly six years less.

The official black unemployment rate is about twice that of whites and the black poverty rate is almost triple that of whites.

Imagine a country where the typical white household has about six times the net worth—including home equity—as the typical household of color. In 2004, median household net worth was \$140,700 for white households and just \$24,800 for households of color.

Imagine a country where the government subsidized decades of segregated suburbanization for whites while the inner cities left to people of color were treated as outsider cities—separate, unequal and disposable. Recent studies have documented continuing discrimination in education, employment, banking, insurance, housing, health care and criminal justice.

It's not South Africa.

Imagine a country that doesn't count you as unemployed just because you're unemployed. To be counted in the official unemployment rate you must be actively searching for work. The government doesn't count people as "unemployed" if they are so discouraged from long and fruitless job searches they have given up looking. It doesn't count as "unemployed" those who couldn't look for work in the past month because they had no childcare, for example. If you need a full-time job, but you're working part-time—whether 1 hour or 34 hours weekly—because that's all you can find, you're counted as employed.

A leading business magazine observed, "Increasingly the labor market is filled with surplus workers who are not being counted as unemployed."

Imagine a country where there is a shortage of jobs, not a shortage of work. Millions of people need work and urgent work needs people—from staffing after-school programs and community centers, to creating affordable housing, to strengthening levees, repairing bridges and building mass transit, to cleaning up pollution and converting to renewable energy.

It's not Germany.

Imagine a country with full prisons instead of full employment. The jail and prison population has more than quadrupled since 1980. The nation is Number One in the world when it comes to locking up its own people. In 1985, 1 in every 320 residents was incarcerated. By mid-year 2005, the figure had increased to 1 in every 136.

Imagine a country where prison is a growth industry. The government spends more than

\$25,000 a year to keep someone in prison, while cutting cost-effective programs of education, employment, community development, and mental illness and addiction treatment to keep them out. In the words of a national center on institutions and alternatives, this nation has "replaced the social safety net with a dragnet."

Imagine a country that has been criticized by human rights organizations for expanding rather than abolishing use of the death penalty—despite documented racial bias and growing evidence of innocents being sentenced to death.

It's not China.

Imagine a country that imprisons black people at a rate much higher than South Africa did under apartheid. One out of eight black men ages 25-29 are incarcerated in prisons or jails compared to one out of 59 white men in the same age group. The nation's bureau of justice statistics reports that incarceration rates for black men of all ages were five to seven times greater than those for white men in the same age groups. Incarceration rates for black women are generally four times higher than for white women.

Imagine a country where a national sentencing project reported in 2004, "Black women born today are five times more likely to go to prison in their lifetimes than black women born in 1974."

Meanwhile, nearly one out ten black men and women are unemployed according to the official count. This includes nearly one out of three black men and women ages 16-19 and one out of six, ages 20-24. Remember, to be counted in the official unemployment rate you must be actively looking for a job and not finding one. "Surplus" workers are increasingly being criminalized.

Imagine a country whose justice department observed, "The fact that the legal order not only countenanced but sustained slavery, segregation, and discrimination for most of our Nation's history—and the fact that the police were bound to uphold that order—set a pattern for police behavior and attitudes toward minority communities that has persisted until the present day." A newspaper headline reads, "GUILTY . . . of being black: Black men say success doesn't save them from being suspected, harassed and detained." Racial profiling and "driving while black" are well-known terms.

Imagine a country where from first arrest to third strikes resulting in lifetime sentences—often for nonviolent petty crimes—blacks and

Latinos are arrested and imprisoned in massively disproportionate numbers.

Imagine a country waging a racially biased "War on Drugs." Nearly three out of four drug users are white, according to government data, but more than three out of four state prisoners convicted of drug offenses are black and Latino.

A study in a prominent medical journal found that drug and alcohol rates were slightly higher for pregnant white women than pregnant black women, but black women were about ten times more likely to be reported to authorities by private doctors and public health clinics—under a mandatory reporting law. Poor women were also more likely to be reported.

It is said that truth is the first casualty in war, and the "War on Drugs" is no exception. Contrary to stereotype, "The typical cocaine user is white, male, a high school graduate employed full time and living in a small metropolitan area or suburb," says the nation's former drug czar. A leading newspaper reports that law officers and judges say, "Although it is clear that whites sell most of the nation's cocaine and account for 80% of its consumers, it is blacks and other minorities who continue to fill up [the] courtrooms and jails, largely because, in a political climate that demands that something be done, they are the easiest people to arrest." They are the easiest to scapegoat.

It's not Australia.

Imagine a country that ranks first in the world in wealth and military power, and 36th in child mortality (under age five), tied with Poland and Chile and well behind countries such as South Korea and Singapore. If the government were a parent, it would be guilty of child abuse. Thousands of children die preventable deaths.

Imagine a country where health care is managed for healthy profit. In many countries health care is a right. But this nation has health care for some instead of health care for all. Nearly one out of five people under age 65 has no health insurance, public or private.

Health care is literally a matter of life and death. Lack of health insurance typically means lack of preventive health care and delayed or second-rate treatment. The uninsured are at much higher risk for chronic disease and disability, and have a 25 percent greater chance of dying (adjusting for physical, economic and behavioral factors). Uninsured women with breast cancer have a 30 percent to 50 percent higher risk of

dying than insured women, for example. Uninsured car crash victims receive less care in the hospital and have a 37 percent higher mortality rate than privately insured patients.

Imagine a country where many descendants of its first inhabitants live on reservations strip-mined of natural resources and have a higher proportion of people in poverty than any other ethnic group.

Imagine a country where five centuries of plunder and lies are masked in expressions like "Indian giver." Where the military still dubs enemy territory, "Indian country."

Imagine a country that has less than 5 percent of the world's population and less than 3 percent of world oil reserves, but consumes 25 percent of the world's oil. It is the number one contributor to global warming. While auto-makers from other countries raced to make more fuel efficient vehicles, this nation churned out bigger gas guzzlers. It has obstructed international action to protect the environment and avoid catastrophic climate change.

It's not Brazil.

Imagine a country whose senate and house of representatives are not representative of the nation. They are overwhelmingly white and male, and increasingly millionaire. One out of three house members are millionaires, according to financial disclosure records that don't even include the value of their primary residences. One out of two senators are millionaires, but no senators are women of color.

Imagine a country that lags behind 67 other countries when it comes to the percentage of women in national legislative bodies. Just 14 percent of its senate and 15 percent of its house of representatives were women in 2006.

If the 100-member senate reflected the population it would have 51 women and 49 men, including 67 whites, 14 Latinos, 13 blacks, 5 Asian and Pacific Islanders and 1 Native American. Instead, it has 14 women and 86 men, including 94 whites, 3 Latinos, 1 black, 2 Asian and Pacific Islanders and no Native Americans.

Imagine a country where the cycle of unequal opportunity is intensifying. Its beneficiaries often slander those most systematically undervalued, underpaid, underemployed, underfinanced, underinsured, underrated and otherwise underserved and undermined—as undeserving, underclass, impoverished in moral and social values and lacking the proper work ethic. The oft-heard stereotype

of deadbeat poor people masks the growing reality of dead-end jobs and disposable workers.

Imagine a country where white men who are "falling down" the economic ladder are being encouraged to believe they are falling because women and people of color are climbing over them to the top or dragging them down from the bottom. That way, they will blame women and people of color rather than corporate and government policy. They will buy the myth of "reverse discrimination." Never mind that white males hold most senior management positions and continuing unreversed discrimination is well documented.

Imagine a country that spends about as much on the military as the rest of the world combined. It also leads the world in arms exports. Companies with close ties to the government are rewarded for war profiteering with new contracts.

Imagine a country whose leaders misuse a fight against terrorism as camouflage for trampling the bill of rights and undermining democracy. The most fundamental civil liberties, including the right not to be thrown into prison indefinitely on the secret word of government officials, are being tossed aside. An attorney general attacked critics of administration policy with McCarthyite words: "To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity. . . They give ammunition to [our] enemies."

In this same country, a five-star general who became president had warned in 1961, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex . . . We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."

Imagine a country whose president "has quietly claimed the authority to disobey more than 750 laws enacted since he took office, asserting that he has the power to set aside any statute passed by Congress when it conflicts with his interpretation of the Constitution." A newspaper investigation reveals, "Among the laws [he] said he can ignore are military rules and regulations,

affirmative-action provisions, requirements that Congress be told about immigration services problems, 'whistle-blower' protections for nuclear regulatory officials, and safeguards against political interference in federally funded research."

It's not Russia.

It's the United States.

The words of Martin Luther King Jr. call down to us today.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but . . . one day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. . . .

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. . . . There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid or day laborer. [2006]

Understanding the Reading

1. Why, after each description, does Sklar choose to name a country that she is not describing?
2. Reread the selection with the knowledge that Sklar is describing the United States and reflect on what is unacceptable in a country with our ideals and values.

Suggestion for Responding

1. Write a personal essay in which you consider the impact these issues have had on you directly, either positively or negatively. ♦

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Bulging Jails Are Other American Exception

ALBERT R. HUNT

One area where the U.S. indisputably leads the world is incarceration.

There are 2.3 million people behind bars, almost one in every 100 Americans. The federal